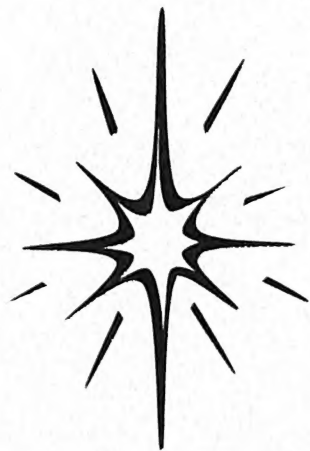


Advent 2015



Central to the celebration of Advent are compelling biblical images that speak of both silence and song. In the first two chapters of Luke's gospel, the biblical characters are either muted in silence or they are singing their hearts out. From the silence of Zechariah, to the Magnificat of Mary, Luke reminds us that this season permits us to experience the full range of the human experience. There is a glorious biblical precedent that beckons us to consider that the season of Advent is a perfect time to ponder in silence the mystery and sacred realities of Incarnation. Solitude is an essential ingredient of the season. If the biblical story is any indicator of the rhythms of life (and it is!), the beauty of solitude is best broken with song.

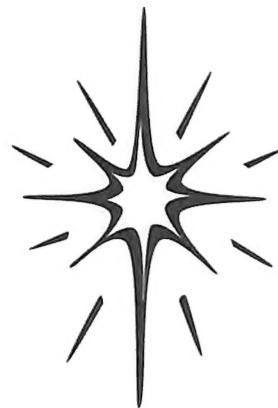
Advent is about all of these things and more. It is the slow trek, the intentional pause, the deliberate focus upon the sadness and song that accompany the human journey. Luke in particular reminds us that our best response to Incarnation are moments of reflection, moments of worship, and moments of song. We need them all to balance our wobbly and feeble lives.

If for no other reason that is the spirit of this Advent devotional guide. We need intentionality in our lives. Our desire is that this book will slow the pace of our collective journeys and that we will breathe into the season.

The reflections offered here speak to those realities. Each meditation is offered as a worshipful gift from various persons affiliated with Gardner-Webb University. I am grateful for colleagues Jim McConnell and Sheri Adams for serving alongside me in this project. In addition, my administrative assistant, Lisa Hollifield, anchors this endeavor in every way. As always, the University staff and administration offer their blessing and support to this Gardner-Webb tradition.

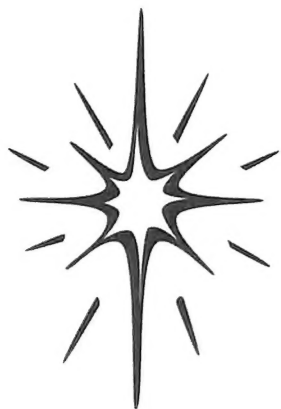
In 2005, our late friend and colleague, Dr. Daniel E. Goodman, edited the first Advent devotional guide. It was for Dan, a labor of love. The booklet was blue in color with a dark blue profile of the Holy City. In the left corner was a gold embossed star. As a small tribute to Dan, each Advent booklet has continued the tradition of including the embossed star on the cover. It is a simple way to remember Dan and to give thanks for his good life and legacy.

So, the journey begins. Let the silence and song invite us into the season.



ADVENT AT GARDNER-WEBB 2015

Danny West
Executive Director, Doctor
of Ministry Program,
School of Divinity
Professor of Preaching and
Pastoral Studies



SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 29

Robert W. Canoy
Dean School of Divinity
and Professor of Theology

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

Talk about the Lord's coming has been on the minds of God's people for a very long time. As long ago as the prophet Jeremiah—and the Judges who lived before the prophets—the hope for a righteous leader weighed heavy on the hearts of the people of God. And never was Jerusalem in greater need of a righteous leader than at the moment Jeremiah shared God's words. Corruption was rampant in the land. The disobedient northern kingdom of Israel had fallen 150 years earlier, and the southern kingdom of Judah was destined for the same. Yet just as things had become their worst, God made a promise: "I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land...and Jerusalem will live in safety" (Jer. 33:15b-16a).

But when? And who is this "righteous branch?" Has he come or is he coming? Will there be signs? And what are we to do in the meantime?

On this first Sunday of Advent believers in many places are reading again (or some perhaps for the first time) these verses from Jeremiah and Luke. In the Gospel we hear Jesus echoing the spirit of Jeremiah's words with His own words: "There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars...men fainting with fear... the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming... because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:25-28). Moreover, Jesus' caution to His first hearers is the same as His caution is to us today. He does not say that God's people will be spared the trouble that is coming on the world. O No! He says that the troubles are in fact the signs! And the signs

are these: "dissipation [hangovers] and drunkenness and cares of this life" (Luke 21:34) that lamentably intoxicate the people of God.

In other words, if we don't watch out, this life will intoxicate us! As someone has said, "The longer that we live in this world, we will become either more-and-more or less-and-less satisfied with this world." Or, to put it another way, "The longer that we live the better we may become at playing the games required for being comfortable in this world." Before long we may discover that we aren't so much living for the kingdom of God as we are trapped in the kingdoms of this world.

Truth is there are many things that can intoxicate us just as badly as alcohol does some people. In fact, Jesus parallels the phrases "cares of this life" and "drunkenness." For Him there was no difference. Either one of these sedatives is equally deadly! So He cautions His people, not the world! Then He adds that only prayer will help us escape from the traps that life sets for us. And, of course, the prayer of which He spoke is the one that He taught earlier: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2-3). That is, "Father, help me keep my focus on You and off of myself. Let Your name become holy in this world through my life, rather than me seeking to be glorified by others. And let Your kingdom, not my petty little kingdom, be more present in this world because of my life. Having prayed thus, Lord, now I am sober!"

And, so, Advent begins.

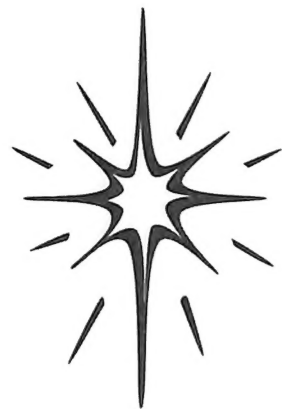
There are times in our lives when hardships, struggles, and conflicts may seem to drive a wedge between what we know and what we hope. We may look around and think that no one can possibly understand the trials we are going through. We may even find ourselves asking "why me... and why now?"

Our patience may be tested, and at times, our faith. We may discover that the answers we seek to whatever those questions may be are not easily attained, and sometimes they may never be fully answered at all.

Our experience is not without those distractions, frustrations, or patience-testing dilemmas. Instead it is one in which we know that as Christians our destination will be reached in spite of the chaos along the road. Without the mayhem, or the challenges, we may not truly appreciate the joys or beauty on our path. Our journey through Christ is made richer because of our situations, the good, the bad, and the ugly. We may not be able to dictate our circumstances, but we can choose how we respond. If we take the time to look around we may see that our "problems" actually pale in comparison to others.

Major Earl Reagan was a World War II veteran, who upon returning from active duty, was called into the ministry. He served the pastorate for nearly four decades, and shared that while in the midst of war, the soldiers longed for peace, hoped for it, and prayed for a time to be reconnected with loved ones, even when it seemed impossible to do so.

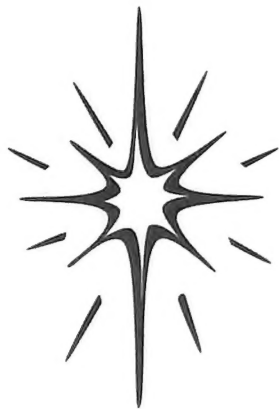
"The horrors of World War II for a front line infantryman were something that no human should ever have to encounter, yet they do. Even today, over seventy years after that world conflict, humans are still inflicting suffering, pain, torture, and death in wars around the globe. But you know what, we endure, we survive, we have the capability to make it through situations we never thought even possible. Bad things happen to Christians and non-Christians alike. No one is immune. Oh, but the hope, the peace, and the comfort that can come because of a relationship with Christ can change the outlook and perspective during those times. How do we respond in times of crisis? I witnessed friends die before me, and saw the faces of Holocaust survivors as we liberated their camps. It was difficult beyond words. But in those same instances, I would see the sacrifice that human beings would make for one another. I saw soldiers throw themselves in front of bullets so their friends could survive. I remember others giving up food rations to those in greater need. War makes no sense, yet in many ways sacrifice doesn't either. I never questioned what I was fighting for; I knew. It was truly worth all the sacrifice any of us made. We were fighting for a peace, and for a hope that was being taken away. I think that is the greatest aspect of understanding the importance of the coming of Christ. He too, knew who and what he was fighting for. He knew we were worth the sacrifice. We still are even today."



MONDAY,
NOVEMBER 30

Noel T. Manning
Associate VP for
Communications and
Marketing

Psalms 90
Luke 17:22-37



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 1**

**Jondra Harmon
Instructor of Voice,
School of Performing and
Visual Arts**

**2 Samuel 7:18-29
Matthew 1:18-25**

I admit it. I struggle with the season of Advent. My evangelical upbringing taught me that Advent should be a time for celebration, a time for joy when we should gladly shout the clichéd phrase, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season!" with Cheshire grins on our faces. We should think only of the gift of God's Son, as he loved us so much that he chose to take on human form in order that we might be saved. But, I find no such joy. In fact, I dread the approach of Thanksgiving and sometimes look with disdain on the month of December altogether.

In the fall of 2009, I was completing my first semester of doctoral work. There was one week of class left and I had a long weekend for Thanksgiving break. My dad was in the hospital, so I traveled to spend the holiday with him and my mother. I didn't quite know what to expect, but when I arrived it was clear that my father was in rough shape. His once full frame had dwindled. His legs lacked almost any muscle and reminded me of straight, shapeless tree branches. However, he was awake, full of spirit, and flashed his signature smile as soon as he saw me. Over the next couple of days we spent time chatting about nothing and everything. He was always a great cook and told me of his desires to take up baking as a new hobby. We watched "All About Eve" and I did my best Bette Davis impressions. We ate terrible hospital turkey and pie. Too soon it was time for me to leave. As I packed to go, I reassured him, as I had several times over the weekend, that I would be back in seven days. And as I

walked out of his room I turned back to look at him. He smiled, and with tear-filled eyes said, "I'll see you in seven days." But he didn't. Within a few short days he was gone.

Advent is a time for reflection, preparation, and waiting. In my faith journey, I struggle to reconcile the feelings of loss, grief, and many times emptiness that accompany the season. Yet, I serve a God who sees in these dark places when I cannot. Just as Israel wandered in the wilderness, by God's grace they were delivered and called blessed. I serve a God who sees my fears and calms them just as he did for Joseph, who took Mary as his wife although she was pregnant. I serve a God of love and comfort who sees me where I am, meets me, and walks with me. I know I am not the only Advent struggler. It is okay to hurt. As I prepare for Advent, I pray and I wait. I seek His face and every year there is just a bit more light in the darkness.

Starting earlier each year, Christmas signs are placed in storefronts and on church marquees. And each year, these signs seem to multiply and grow louder, to push buying more or buying less. "Try an iPhone 6" and "Keep Christ in Christmas" both shout to passersby and, regardless of intention, these signs tend to distract, to lead to discord and discontent.

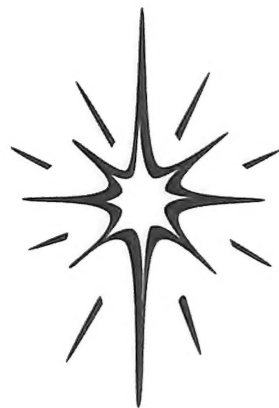
As Luke 2 points out, there is only one true sign: Jesus himself. The story of his birth is a simple one but with profound effect. Often, as the Christmas season starts, the busyness and bustle, fuss and fun overshadow the quiet, less flashy message of our Savior's grace. He does not raise his voice to be heard. He speaks softly and asks us to listen.

I sometimes have to remember to look for the subtle but significant signs of the Lord beneath numerous annual traditions. Driving to tree farms with my brother, mom, and dad to choose, cut, drag, and tie down a White Pine – not too scrawny, not too tall, not too full of holes. Decorating those trees with Daddy grumbling about how many times Momma and I asked him to turn the tree just a bit to the left and then back to the right. Riding around downtown Richmond to see Christmas light displays in the back of Bubba's station wagon, cousins shoving each other out of the way, trying to maintain balance around corners, whining about the cold and the rain. Gathering for breakfast at Nana's house, my mom and her two sisters helping my grandmother fix fried apples, grits, eggs, country ham and red-eye gravy, biscuits – all while tripping over each other and trying not to let anything burn or get lumpy.

To remind my family of Christ and his often silent presence, of the choice we must make to look beyond the commotion and hear more than the noise, we listen to the story of the one true sign. Before we are allowed to go downstairs and shake a brightly-wrapped package, we gather to read Luke 2 every Christmas morning:

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'"

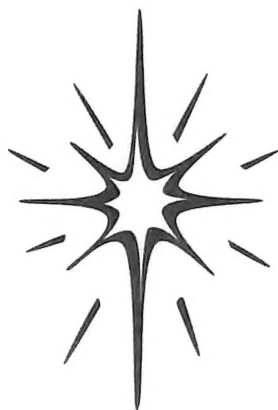
For all of us, family memories are precious. Let's remember that they point to a more precious truth and provide a glimpse of what Jesus brings to the season and to life. Through the trees and lights, we experience warmth and community and togetherness. Laughter and love last far longer than red ornaments and green garland. After every cup of hot chocolate and piece of toffee are gone, peace and joy remain. And for that we can be thankful.



**WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 2**

**Sarah Davis
Major Gifts Officer**

**Isaiah 1:24-31
Luke 11:29-32**



**THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 3**

**Lisa Hollifield
Secretary School of
Divinity and to Director
of Ministry Leadership
Development**

**Malachi 3:5-12
Luke 24:44-49**

I recently watched a movie that made me think about the scripture I was assigned for the Advent devotional. The movie was in no way a religious one. It was an action-packed, foul language-filled, Liam Neeson movie. For the two hours I was watching I did not have time to think about the connection but after catching my breath I started pondering.

In the movie, Liam Neeson is not a very good person. He works for the mob and has killed many people over the years. He left his family when his son was young to protect them from his lifestyle. As an adult, his son has a family of his own and wants nothing to do with his father. Unfortunately, circumstances have thrown them together and the father is trying to save his son's life. As much as the son resists, he finally sees that in order to live he needs his father's help. I will not give away the ending to the movie but it reminded me of our relationship with God.

In Malachi 3:5-12, God assures us He is faithful and even though we wander from Him, He will be there when we need Him. In Luke 24:44-49, Jesus reminds us of God's promise to forgive our sins and reward us for trusting in Him.

In no way am I comparing Liam Neeson's character to God, but it did remind me of our relationship with Him. No matter how many times his son told him, "I don't want your help," he was always there and never asked for anything in return.

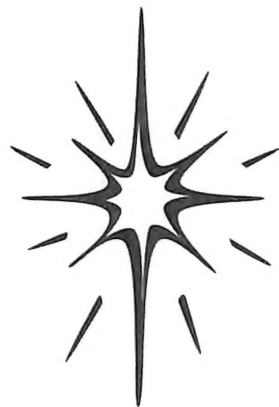
In this Advent season, put your hope in Jesus and know that if you repent you will be forgiven, and if you trust in Him you will receive the rewards of God's faithfulness.

If we let it, the Church calendar creates space for us to slow down during Advent. It brings us back to these moments each year. These moments that tell us of Mary and Joseph, of Zechariah and Elizabeth, of Shepherds and Wisemen, of songs and prophecies, of mangers and inns. These moments that we know all too well. These moments where we can skim over the words on the page and still know the story because we have heard it that many times. These moments, the ones that burst with waiting and anticipation, are often exhaled in hurried breaths. These moments, the ones that are not in our "ordinary time," have become, well ordinary. And if we are honest, we don't slow down at all.

Sometimes, we forget how to wait. Or at least I do. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I know how this story is going to go. I know that there is going to be no room in the inn and that Baby Jesus is going to be born in the manger. I know that there will be wisemen and shepherds and little drummer boys playing their pa rum pum pum pum's. And I know that Jesus is going to grow up, hang out at the temple, heal people, feed them, and tell little children to come to Him and that we need to be more like them. I know that Jesus is going to make it to the Cross and then three days later, He will rise again. And I know that Jesus is alive now. I know all of these things and I've known all of these things. And I take it all for granted. Because in my normal rhythm of life, I've forgotten how to sit with Zechariah and wait. I've confused waiting with inactivity. Maybe I'm not alone?

We find Zechariah bursting with the Holy Spirit in our Gospel reading. Caught up in the birth of his son, John (the Baptist, of course), Zechariah is beaming. As anticipation bubbles within, and as he prophecies, he also waits - because though the way will be prepared, and though the Prophet of the Most High has been born, Jesus is still coming and we must wait for Him. We must be careful not to skip ahead.

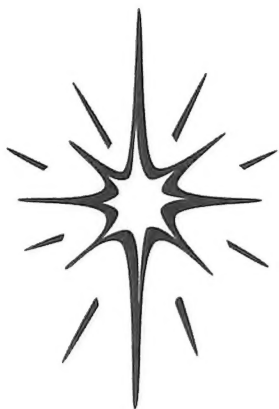
Spend some time with Zechariah, my friends. Spend some time in the Scriptures, with fresh eyes, anxious eyes, seasoned eyes. And spend some time in the uncomfortable moments - those moments during this season where we wait. Jesus is coming - but these moments are important too. It's in these moments, that life is growing - life is growing in Mary's womb, and life is growing all around us. Let us not forget these moments, the ones that lead us to the moment.



**FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 4**

**Elizabeth Maye
Student, School of Divinity**

**Malachi 3:13-18
Luke 1:68-79**



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 5**

**Robin Hamrick
Associate VP for Business
and Finance**

**Malachi 4:1-6
Luke 9:1-6**

Merry Christmas. Happy Holidays. Feliz Navidad. These are popular Christmas phrases we have all heard and probably shared with others at some point in time. The Christmas season is the time of year when joy should abound, especially for those of us who know Jesus as our Lord and Savior. But...is Christmas, "the most wonderful time of the year," really a joyous time for everyone?

I think we are often so consumed with our own lives and our Christmas to-do lists that many times we fail to notice those around us who are in need. I know I'm always scurrying around at the last minute, worrying that I may not have picked up enough Christmas gifts for each of the boys' teachers, or I'm focusing on what I need to prepare for the Christmas meal. Sadly, I've realized that many times I'm not focused on the true needs of others. It wasn't until a few years ago that I really stopped and realized that for many people, Christmas is not a joyous time of the year. In fact, there are many individuals out there who dread the season for one reason or another. Perhaps they have recently experienced the death of a loved one or the loss of the traditional family structure.

In Malachi 4:2, God promises His people that "the sun of righteousness" "will rise with healing in its wings...." The final verses of the Old Testament provide hope to His faithful followers. While Jesus came to heal, we must also remember that God sent His Son to earth in human form. Being fully human, Jesus experienced a range of human emotions,

including grief (John 11:33-35) and rejection (Matthew 27:46). How strangely comforting to know that Jesus can identify with any emotion I might be experiencing. Many times we look for Jesus to provide healing during our time on earth. Oftentimes healing does come as expected, but we must realize that true healing will not occur until we are in His presence in Heaven. This is the hope of the Christmas Season.

Jesus sent His disciples out to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:2) and share the hope of Christ Jesus. This Christmas season let us be the disciples that God has called us to be. I challenge you to slow down and make an effort to seek out those around you who may need encouragement, love, and hope. Sometimes the smallest gesture can mean the most. How can you share the light of Christ with others this Christmas season?

Dear Heavenly Father, this Advent Season I come to You thanking You for the hope Your Son Jesus brought to this world. I pray especially for those who are hurting today and ask that You reveal to me opportunities to share this hope with those who most need it this Christmas. Amen.

When we were children it seemed as though the calendar took “forever” to come back around to Christmas. We made big plans for the season and looked forward to family gathering in from out of town; and, O my goodness, how we dog-eared the Sears catalogue in anticipation of a new NFL hoodie bearing the logo of our favorite team. But, we thought, “Christmas sure takes its sweet time getting here.”

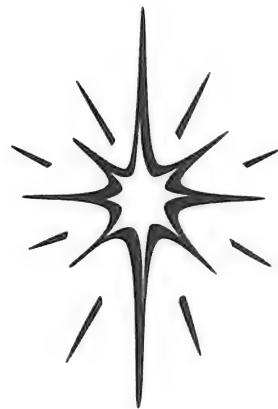
That makes sense now. At eight years of age, a year makes up a full 12% of a child’s life, whereas after fifty-six of them a year is not even 2% of life so far. In a sense, then, time is speeding up on us! At least it seems like it is. These days I can just “blink” and it’s time to get the Advent wreath out again, thinking all the while, “Surely we just wrapped up the candles and stored them away!”

The passing of time gives us a more grounded perspective on the way we pass the time we have. Perhaps this is why it is forever true, as the prophet declared it, that “suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come” (Malachi 3:1). That word “suddenly” is built off a Hebrew word meaning “opening the eyes,” like in a “blink.” Before we know it, the Lord is going to be here – expecting the surrender of our wills to fill the gaps of our disobedience and watching for our pride to be brought low in honor of his holy advent into our lives. That’s surely the case in the biblical timeline. Four hundred years pass between Malachi’s prophecy rounding out our Old Testament and the arrival of John the Baptist challenging hearts to prepare for the Lord’s coming in Jesus. Four hundred years pass in the simple turn of the page from Old Testament to New –

like a blink. Surely we have to sense it – the Lord’s coming is nearer to us now than ever before.

That being so, we best prepare for him. And, while we look to make a straight path for him into our hearts and minds and actions, the prophet, yet again, shows us the best way to get ready. Since the Lord’s coming is like a “refiner’s fire,” we prepare by confessing our sin, our impurities, so that their power over us can be left behind – consumed by his forgiveness burning in our souls. And, since his coming is like “laundry soap,” we can let him handle the deep stains we carry along life’s journey – hurts, griefs, suffering, heartaches – and leave us washed by his grace.

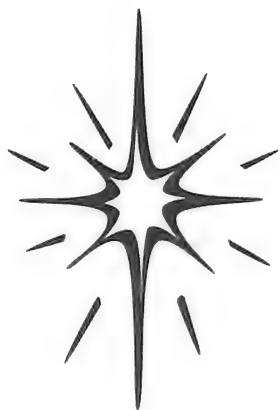
When we prepare for the Lord’s coming in this way, dog-earing the biblical catalogue of the prophet’s and the Baptist’s call into the way of repentance, then we are well-positioned “to see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6). And, suddenly, he’s here, and we rejoice!



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 6

Tony Tench
Pastor, First Baptist
Church of Shelby, NC

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Taura Glaze
Student, School of Divinity

Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." -
Isaiah 40:1

Christian persecution and hate crimes are increasing in our day and time. The brutality that we have witnessed by terrorist groups such as ISIS, as well as the church massacre at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, are tragic events that have shaken our nation to the core. The terror that we experience in our world, hopelessness caused by personal loss, sickness, broken dreams, and yes, even the pain that comes with waiting on a promise, is a reality in the life of a believer. In the midst of these chaotic times and painful situations, there is something about comforting words that provide the encouragement needed to endure the trials that we face from day to day; words like the ones spoken by Julian of Norwich that reminds us that, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all matter of thing shall be well." From time to time, maybe more often than acknowledged, we find ourselves in need of this kind of comfort. At those moments, the words, "Comfort, O comfort my people," read in the book of Isaiah, are like a sweet song that soothes our broken hearts and restores our hopeless souls.

During the Advent season, a special time that marks the beginning of the Christian year, we remember God's answer to the crisis of sin that places a wedge between Him and those He loves. This is a time

when we rejoice in His faithfulness to send His provision of relief through the miraculous birth of His son. Like those who attend a birthday party, in this season we join with other believers and give our undivided attention to Jesus, the guest of honor. And with great anticipation we look forward to celebrating God's gift of comfort to the world.

The gift of Jesus shattered the darkness that plagued the people of that day. His arrival inspired new hope to a people who were otherwise hopeless. To this day, solace is found in the Savior, who is our only true source of comfort. Have you found this to be true in your life? Certainly you have! Let the knowledge that He's provided comfort in the past encourage you to trust Him to be the comfort that you need everyday.

This Advent, as you prepare your heart to receive the Gift of God, find comfort in knowing that the prophecy of His first coming has already been fulfilled. As we look to celebrating the birth of Jesus, let your heart find hope and rest while you wait patiently for the glory of the Lord to be revealed once more. Until then, find comfort in the narrative of the birth of our Messiah, the answer to hopelessness caused by the violence of this world, as well as any internal anxiety that tries to flood our hearts. Rejoice; Jesus is our comfort.

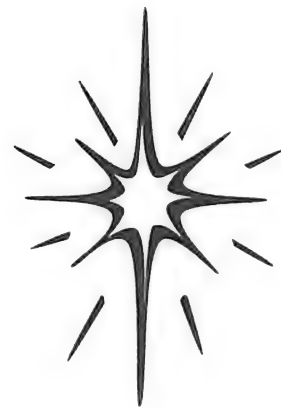
Praise be to the God who builds highways in the desert. I never really appreciated roads until I spent seven months in the Kuwaiti desert deployed with an army unit right after 9/11. The roads that existed between our encampments and Doha quickly disappeared with the first sand storm, which was rarely more than a few days or hours away. Navigation had to be via compass and GPS across terrain that was littered with land mines left over from the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait. How I longed for a road that would connect me safely between where I was and where I wanted to be.

Isaiah 19:18-25 discusses the unification of three powers: Egypt, Assyria, and Israel under the protection and love of a savior and defender. Verses 23 and 24 exclaim, "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians will go to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth." Given the prophetic nature of Isaiah it would be easy to "fall into the trap" of assuming the focus of the passage is on socio-political events and to seek signs of Middle East peace as a prelude to Messianic fulfillment. But prophecy is far more likely to illuminate the powerful nature of God than the fickle lives of men and nations. Isaiah points to the

reconciling nature of one who saves, defends, and rescues, the one who reconciles the irreconcilable, who builds pathways of unity, and highways to shared worship. The LORD of Isaiah's prophecy is to be looked upon with awe for the mighty work of unity He will accomplish.

Jesus in the Gospels is, likewise, seen as savior, defender, redeemer, and reconciler. In John 12:27-33, Jesus describes his pending death, proclaiming, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." Jesus' death on the cross has become the highway through which all humankind will be drawn together in Christ. It is in Jesus that every tribe, tongue, and nation finds its place at the foot of the cross. All are drawn together in Christ, through Christ, and because of Christ.

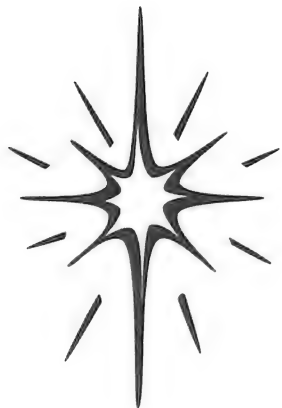
Apart from a baby in a manger, who becomes a savior on a cross and a reconciler through His resurrection, our world would be adrift in a desert without roads, without hope, and dependent on the whims of sand storms and the cruelty of land mines. But Praise be to the God who builds highways in the desert, who set a cross as a light for our journey, and who sent a baby to draw all to Himself and in doing so draws all to one another.



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 8**

**Dr. Joseph W. Caldwell
Assistant Professor of
Ministry Studies and
Director of Accelerated
Pastoral Ministry Program**

**Isaiah 19:18-25
John 12:27-33**



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 9

Flossie Bonner

Isaiah 35:3-7
Luke 7:18-30

Through God's guidance, the prophet Isaiah predicted that a Messiah would be born, and he urged his people to encourage each other in the light of God's promise.

Many years later, a baby was born in a modest stable in Bethlehem, just as Isaiah had said and just as God had promised. Several years ago, while on a trip to the Holy Land with the Gardner-Webb School of Divinity, I was privileged to see for myself the places where the prophecy was fulfilled. Never again will I envision or experience Christmas and Easter as I did before this experience.

We visited the spot where Jesus is said to have been born, sang Christmas carols in a cave probably similar to the area where Mary and Joseph were directed by the inn keeper, and viewed fields similar to those where shepherds were tending their sheep. We were baptized in the Jordan River. We visited the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed before he was arrested, and saw the steps where he later walked. We saw the empty tomb from which Jesus arose and had a beautiful worship service in the garden around that tomb. Jesus was everywhere.

Jesus is still everywhere. Advent has been defined as the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event. What an understatement!

Can you imagine sending a child into this world for the sole purpose of dying a horrible death so that those who believe in Him would be saved and have the privilege of spending eternity in Heaven? This wonderful season reminds us of the continuing presence of Jesus and the fulfillment of God's promises to us.

Jesus is still everywhere, and God is still keeping his promises.

I have never drawn water from a well. I have never been in need of a well in my village. I have never known what it means to be without water. Yet, I know what it means to be desperately thirsty—to be so spiritually dry that only sand and rock are seen for miles.

In Isaiah, salvation is a well. Drawing this water leads to great praise and thanksgiving. In John, Jesus' living water brings salvation for the Samaritan woman, who later proclaims this good news to her entire town. But water is so easily available to me. I never have to draw water, and if I did I imagine that I would be stubborn enough to believe that I will never need help pulling it from the ground. I can do this on my own. I can meet my own needs.

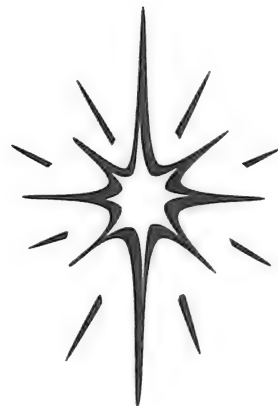
The purpose of this season is preparation. We prepare meals, gifts, and get-togethers. We set the table with our finest dishes, search for months to find the perfect gift, and work tirelessly to outdo the previous years' events. Yet we are called to prepare our souls to be filled. This requires rest in God, but we are doers, and we do it all ourselves. We often have no rest and certainly no peace.

I typically approach this season wanting God, but I become so lost in my own desert of a plan that my whole life feels like a mirage. I strive to produce my own water; but I end up disappointed and drier than ever. In rest, I catch a glimpse of Jesus. Even a small drop of grace becomes a wellspring of life. Jesus steps

in and says, "Stick with me and you will never have to thirst again. Stop striving. Remain here with me."

I wish I could say that the water bursts forth instantly and my life becomes flooded with His gift of salvation. Did I mention my stubbornness? I want to stop working so hard to get to God, but I often cross my arms and refuse to move my pride aside. I require some coaxing. Jesus works on my soul, patiently removing the hard stones, preparing the way for His well in my soul.

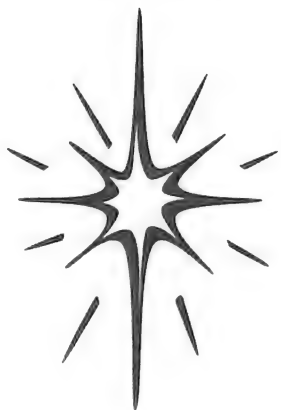
The Advent season can be right in the middle of our spiritual desert. Give in to His grace. Give in to His rest. Come away from rushing and striving. Let us allow Jesus to work on our souls, preparing the way for His overwhelming gift of salvation. Let us approach this season with the knowledge that He is present and He wants to give us a never-ending well of life.



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 10

Anna Hulsey
Student, School of Divinity

Isaiah 12:2-6
John 4:1-15



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 11

Joseph Moore
Assistant Professor of
History

Amos 8:4-12
Mark 13

Just before the 1898 Advent season, the women of Wilmington, NC began fleeing suddenly from their homes. For two long, cold nights they slept with their children in the dismal, swampy regions that dot the state's coast. Scattered reports told of women giving birth amidst the trauma, with the newborns dying in their mothers' arms. People carried with them what they could; many never returned.

The trauma felt all the worse because it came on the heels of heightened hopes for brighter days. Just two years beforehand, white and black North Carolinians had come together politically for the first time ever. Across the state, white and black men gathered shoulder to shoulder to share in being assemblymen, alderman, and town councilmen. Racial healing offered peace to a weary South. Then, the ferocity of racism roared back. Wilmington's white citizens approved a "White Declaration of Rights," swearing they would never be "ruled by men of African origin." They gathered. They marched. They burned. They shot. And the black families of Wilmington fled for their lives, praying to God for mercy for themselves, their children, and the husbands who stayed behind trying to defend their homes.

Many times, in many lands, and in many languages, feasts have been turned into mourning, and all songs into lamentations. Many nations have risen up against nations—and at times against themselves—as neighbor has hated neighbor. Prophecies of coming sufferings give scant comfort to the sufferers. Jesus himself offers a saddened "Woe to those who are

pregnant" in those days when the sun will be dark and the moon not give light. When even Jesus is depressed, what hope is there for weary children clinging to tired mothers in damp darkness?

Redemption is a real thing. It is more than metaphor. These words were spoken to actual people with tangible realities to dread. In a world in which too many refugees cling to too few rafts, Amos' prophecy and Jesus' teachings should remind us of what we already know but try not to see.

Alas, we would prefer a metaphor of coming salvation addressing only our hearts. Neither Amos nor Jesus will allow us this, for it is too little comfort. For those who actually suffer and who literally weep, there is greater redemption coming. A salvation of soul and situation is not only possible; it is necessary for the advent of a Gospel worth delivering. For those mercifully spared in the interim, we might simply wonder at our great fortune. But if we take seriously Christ's admonition to "stay awake" as we wait, perhaps our wide-opened eyes will see the sufferings of those who flee and open our doors, take them in, and offer to wait with them a while for the advent of salvation.

These verses from the prophet Amos, which conclude the book by his name, offer a stark contrast to the reader. In vv. 8-10, through the prophet, God promises to punish sinful Israel. In the midst of this dire warning of God's coming judgment, however, there are words of hope. Even though God promises destruction, God "will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (vs. 8). Even though Israel will be "shaken" by the nations around it, "no pebble shall fall to the ground" (v. 9). In v. 11, the mood completely shifts. Again, through the prophet, God promises that "on that day" God will begin to restore Israel, and will do so through one of David's ancestors. What follows is then a description of what the restored Israel will be like, a description that should remind the reader of what God's original creation was like. The people will "make gardens and eat their fruit" (v. 14); "the time is surely coming" when Israel will no longer have to worry that other nations will overpower them and haul them off into exile. "That day" will be a day of peace and prosperity. Given the context, one understands that it will be a time in which God has removed sin and evil from the life of Israel.

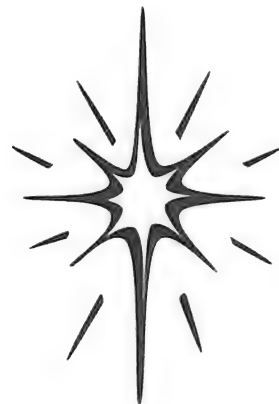
It is safe to say that Israel longed for this day foreseen by the prophet Amos. Many Jewish writings, both within the Old Testament and outside of it, return to this topic. "That day" is described in many ways, but it is clear that many within ancient Judaism were faithfully waiting for "that day," the day on which God would deliver Israel from all its enemies.

Waiting for "that day" is the context in which we find Zechariah and Elizabeth, faithful, pious Jews. In Luke 1:13, when the angel Gabriel visits Zechariah while he

is ministering in the temple, the angel tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard. We don't know what Zechariah had been praying for; most likely it was for a son, but it could also have been that God would bring about "that day." Maybe it was for both.

Initially, however, Zechariah doubted Gabriel's announcement that he and Elizabeth were to have a son (and name him John). When he demanded a sign from the angel, he received one: Gabriel rendered Zechariah unable to speak. In Luke 1:57-66, however, Zechariah shows us that he has had a change of heart. By emphatically stating that the newborn son was to be named John, Zechariah demonstrates his obedience to his angelic visitor. After a time of spiritual discipline, Zechariah's faith in the God of Israel and God's purposes had been restored, as was his voice. Zechariah recognized that God was intervening on behalf of Israel, and that his son John would play an integral role in what God was doing.

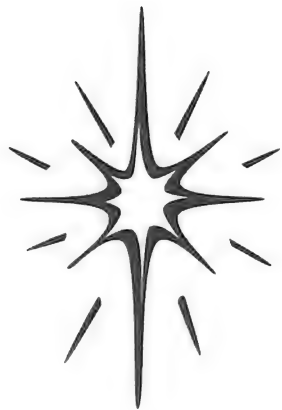
As we patiently await "that day," the day in which God will restore God's creation to its original, sinless state, let us remain faithful and aligned with God's purposes. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we have experienced God's deliverance from sin, and so we know that God's work of restoration is underway. May we now be found faithful, giving voice to the hope that we have in Christ, a hope that is confident that "that day" is coming. This Advent, may we join God in God's work of restoration, as we await God's final defeat of death and evil.



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 12**

**Jim McConnell
Assistant Professor of New
Testament Interpretation**

**Amos 9:8-15
Luke 1:57-66**



**SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 13**

**Paula Fontana Qualls
Professor, Department of
Religious Studies and
Philosophy**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18**

Exuberant joy. As the sand flung through the air, releasing itself from a tiny hole in the corner of a cardboard box, a little boy laughed and laughed with joy as he held the box and spun around in circles. A box of sand. Entertainment for hours. This event characterized the life of a ten year-old boy whom I met at an orphanage in Mexico. During my week-long stay at the orphanage, I greeted every morning with anticipation, waiting to see that little boy. His joy ministered to my soul. When our team was laying tile and grout in the sparse, outdoor bathhouse, that child would sing to us, clapping his hands to keep rhythm. I can still hear his sweet tenor voice singing in Spanish, "*Este es el dia, Este es el dia...* this is the day that the Lord has made." Pure joy.

In his book, *The Land*, Walter Brueggemann delineates two experiences of Ancient Israel: landedness and landlessness. The landed are settled in the promised land with an organized nation and an established monarchy. The landless have no land, no monarch, no national stability. Out of their comfort and security, the landed manage their own lives and tend to forget about the LORD. In contrast, landless Israel longs for land, and out of their barrenness they depend upon the LORD, finding rich significance and meaning in life, even joy. The landed have a pseudo-security while the landless have true security, belonging and wholeness found only in relationship with the LORD and the covenant community. Like Ancient Israel, the little boy at the orphanage lacked the comforts of the landed.

He had no permanent home, no parents, and little hope for his future, yet he had everything.

In our scripture reading today, I am reminded of this little boy and the two histories of Ancient Israel. The gospel of Luke describes the landed "brood of vipers" of John the Baptist's day. Their self-righteous hypocrisy is typical of the landed and John does not hesitate to call them out on it. They are living in the land, settled, secure, stingy, greedy, and deceitful. John challenges them to bear fruit worthy of repentance and then tells them about the Christ who is yet to come. In Zephaniah, the prophet speaks to Ancient Israel, who is in exile. Their nation has fallen to the enemy and they have been expunged from their land. Zephaniah calls the suffering, landless exiles to rejoice, for the Lord is in their midst; their suffering has come to an end and they shall be returned to their homeland. The musical crescendo is raised as the landless are called to anticipate the hope that they have in the LORD.

As we reflect on these two experiences in the Biblical text, where do we find ourselves? Rejoice with me, Oh Daughter of Zion for the LORD is in our midst. He is coming soon. *Este es el dia....* Can you hear the music?

Why do nativity scenes leave out manure?

The scenes on our mantles, coffee tables and church grounds are pristine and sanitized. Mary certainly looks glowing, in spite of giving birth on a hay pile (with no midwife in sight). We usually have barnyard animals in our scene. They are calm, clean, and gazing lovingly, without a dropping anywhere to be found near their feed trough. Since it was empty enough to hold a baby, the animals must have eaten everything, right?

The older I get, the more this troubles me. I worry that we have forgotten that Jesus arrives in a mess, and that we are less worried than ever about trying to clean that mess up.

Deb-Richardson Moore, pastor of Triune Mercy Center in Greenville, SC, recalls a story from a book called *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson. In this version of the original Gospels, a group of un-kept, unruly neighborhood street children named the Herdmans, invade the local church Christmas play.

When they discover the manure of the world into which the King of Kings is born, they are offended and scandalized.

In fact, they are so offended by the way that Jesus comes into the world, that they decide to do something about it! They re-write the story to beat the innkeeper into giving Mary a room, knock off Herod, and keep those filthy shepherds away from the baby.

Misguided? Perhaps. But perhaps our Christmas pageant needs to be interrupted with this offensive news: That God was born next to a pile of potential fertilizer is a call to action.

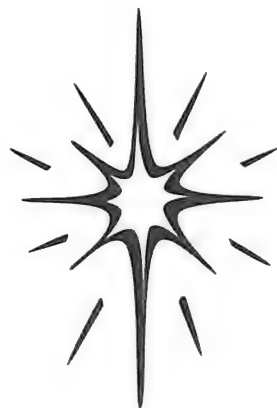
Jesus was born in a mess, because He came to call and empower us to begin cleaning it up, and work for His Kingdom Come.

We should be so mortified by the mess surrounding him that we are compelled to follow in helping Him to clean it up. We cannot truly see Jesus unless our hearts are moved to shovel away the injustice, poverty, neglect and struggle of our global neighborhood—one pile at a time.

In today's Advent reading, the prophet Isaiah encourages us to wait expectantly and patiently, but not passively, for the Savior who will turn the world upside down. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus then compels us to action, as He announces that He is here to restore justice and clean up the mess.

As we look at the scenes of the Holy Family in our homes and churches this year, may we see that these perfect images exist because the ultimate grace of Christ has overcome the dirt and filth that surrounds us. He does so with a compassion and love that we cannot help but share.

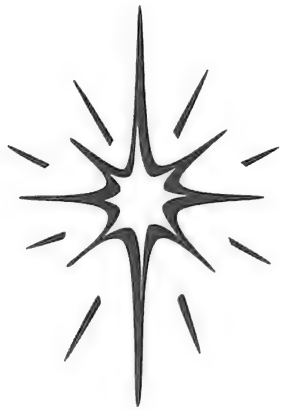
May your preparation of the stable remind you that the beauty of the season is found in Jesus the Christ, loving us so much that He came into a world full of manure—and empowering us to love others enough to do something about it.



**MONDAY,
DECEMBER 14**

**Tom Legrand
Director of
The Center for
Christian Ethics and
Social Responsibility**

**Isaiah 11:1-9
Luke 4:16-19**



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 15**

**Anthony Negbenebor
Professor of Economics**

**Numbers 16:20-35
Luke 4:20-30**

In the Gospel of Mark we were informed that Jesus had four brothers - James, Joseph, Judas and Simon, and several sisters - (Mark 6:3). At first, the people were proud of the hometown boy whose preaching had drawn rave reviews (Luke 4:14-22). When Jesus referred to himself as the one who would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah (Luke 4:17-19), the people responded, "He's no Messiah! He's just like us! He's the carpenter's kid from down the street. God doesn't speak through people like him." Things got progressively uglier as the people "drove Jesus out of town, and took him to the brow of a hill, in order to throw him off the cliff. However, Jesus walked right through the crowd and went on his way" (Luke 4:29-30).

What an ugly and terrible moment! Jesus' childhood friends and neighbors tried to kill him. But even more tragic is something we don't hear in the story: where were Jesus' brothers when the crowd wanted to kill him? When Jesus was in trouble, his brothers were invisible.

As I listened passionately today to the television reenactment of 2008's hurricane Ike survivors and rescuers narrate their stories, there was a common tapestry among their narrations. Love for one another overcame innate and human created barriers. A man was in tears narrating his story to the news media. He said, "I have lived in this neighborhood for eight years with this family and we never one day spoke to each other until today. He saved my life, he pulled me out of the deep water." Another said, "I always knew they lived two doors

down from me but we were very busy folks and we just did not have the time to get to know each other." One family said, "I have not spoken to my sister in twelve years until I heard about this hurricane. We just did not get along." Why do we wait for crises to show our love for one another?

As we approach the season of Advent and we celebrate His birth, Jesus wants you to know that He loves you no matter who you are, what you have done or where you have been. Our love for others is sometimes tainted with self-interest but if we truly experience the love of Jesus who came, was rejected in his home town and gave His life for us, then we can love one another selflessly.

Are you willing to lay down your life for others just as Jesus did for you? Are you willing to make yourself vulnerable, even put yourself in peril to save another? According to King Solomon, we all share a "common destiny." I have to ask myself, am I using the days I have left to love, love, and love?

Lord God, help me to love others just as you have loved me.

For the past two years our news cycles have reported on numerous refugee crises both at home and abroad. In 2014, refugees from Central America flooded the Texas border fleeing from drug cartels and poverty. This year, refugees from the Middle East and Africa continue to overwhelm Europe as they flee from their own war-torn countries. Many refugees report feeling a strong sense of a loss of home, a loss of protection, and a loss of belonging. The stories of refugees can tell us something about our advent experience as we wait in a land that is not our home for the inauguration of the Reign of God.

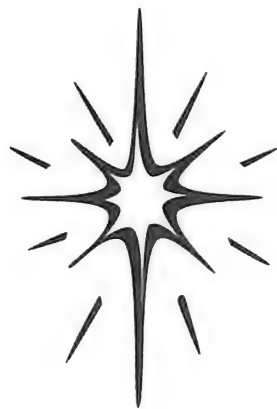
The passage from Micah 4:8–13 touches on this sentiment. The prophet promises that God will rescue God's people from their exile in Babylon (Mic 4:10) and that God will bring a great leader to Zion (4:8). At the same time the prophet acknowledges that the children of God currently “writhe in agony like a woman in labor” because they must go to Babylon (Mic 4:9–10). The agony of exile is so intense, that the prophet can only describe it as labor pains. But, something is about to be born.

Advent provides us an opportunity to notice and practice this pain of exile, of displacement from the ultimate realization of welcome into our true homeland. In this we may experience solidarity with displaced people across the globe, despite the obstacle of our relative comfort and ease.

New Testament writers pick up on the theme of exile as they describe the longing that the Jews felt for the restoration of their nation and for the Messiah's enthronement in Jerusalem. Throughout Jesus' ministry he encountered people who were dissatisfied with the Messiah he turned out to be. In Luke 7:31–35 Jesus compares his dissatisfied listeners to children who want him to dance to their tune. Perhaps they were looking for a Messiah who would “rise and thresh....and break many nations to pieces” (Mic 4:13). Instead, they found a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34).

The ones whom Jesus' listeners thought that he should “break to pieces” were the very ones he embraced. The ones whom Jesus' listeners thought he would overthrow, were those to whom he eventually succumbed, dying on a Roman cross.

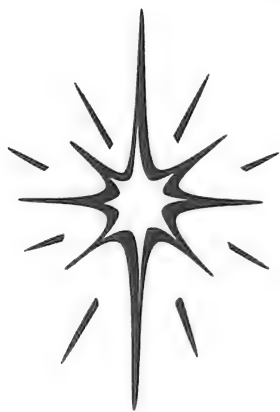
As we wait in this season of Advent—this season of labor pains—may we hope for a Jesus who dances to His own tune. May we await the birth of a Jesus, who embraces us, the worst of tax collectors and sinners. A Jesus, who, himself, was broken to pieces, who showed us that our homeland is the unusual and hopeful Reign of God.



**WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 16**

**Anna Sieges Beal
Instructor of
Religious Studies**

**Micah 4:8–13
Luke 7:31–35**



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 17

Elizabeth Arnold
Graduate, School of
Divinity

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Luke 22:14-23

"Whenever I come to the fountain to drink I find the living water itself thirsty; and it drinks me while I drink it."

-Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

"The days are coming..." Maybe Jesus heard these echoes in his head of the prophet long ago as he made the long journey to Jerusalem. The days of the Passover were coming; the days of his suffering were coming. Jesus had been eagerly waiting to eat the Passover meal with his disciples, which seems strange. They traveled together for years. Surely they must have eaten most of their meals together? But Jesus says that he has greatly desired to eat this meal with them on this night, and he will wait again to eat it "until it has been fulfilled." He had been counting the days and the hours until this supper. This day had been coming.

The bread—the body of Jesus—taken inside these weak and simple peasants would transform them into the the Body of Christ, the Church. Their actual bodies would become temples for God's spirit, living sacrifices, and sometimes dying sacrifices. This torn crust they swallowed and consumed would in turn consume them, their identities and lives forever inseparable from this act of taking in the suffering mission of Christ. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, would quote the prophet Joel and announce to the crowds of Jerusalem: "God declares...in those days I will pour out my spirit..."

"The days are coming..." Jeremiah repeated over and over to himself as he waited for the new covenant that God would make. This new covenant that Jeremiah envisioned was going to be written inside of the people, on their hearts and minds. We might be tempted to think this was just for their personal improvement or to secure obedience and avoid punishment. But Jeremiah knew better. The law was meant to be inside of them so it could spill out of them in the forms of praise, gratitude, justice, and righteousness. The covenant was going to be implanted in their hearts and minds so that the reason for the covenant could be fulfilled: God promised Abram, "I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing."

From the days of Abram, of Jeremiah, of Jesus, and of Peter, the holy presence seeks to fill us in order for it to leak back out again. In a thousand different ways, that bread will break us and the wine will pour us out. And like those disciples before us, each time we are broken and poured out, our identities and lives grow more and more inseparable from this act of taking in the suffering mission of Christ.

We have been invited to join Jesus at his table, eat this bread, and become this bread for a world longing for days of transformation and hope. "And the days are coming..."

Psalm 80 is a prayer to God for the Restoration of Israel. The Psalmist is desperately crying out to the Holy, Eternal, and Almighty God to turn his wrath and judgment away from and to save his people.

Many of God's attributes are recognized and identified in this passage. In verse 1, the Psalmist pleads, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel." God is Israel's Shepherd. He is the One who dwells "between the cherubim," or above the Ark of the Covenant located in the Most Holy Place of the temple. "O Lord God of hosts" (vs. 4) could be translated literally "O Yahweh, O God, O Omnipotence." He is all powerful, He is all holy, His judgement and justice is real and true; and His anger is being poured out on Israel (vs. 4-6).

The recurring refrain in Psalm 80 (vs. 3, 7, 19) is an urgent plea for God to cast His face on His people, and to reveal His presence to them.

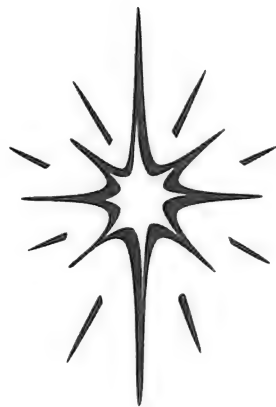
"Restore us. O God of hosts;
Cause your face to shine,
And we shall be saved!"

Verses 5 and 6 describe the miserable state of the people as they feed on "bread of tears." But this refrain recognizes that there is One who can deliver them from their misery and their sinful state. The call is for "God's face to shine" which will cast light on sin and darkness, and bring relief to Israel's suffering. The people of Israel were praying and yearning for the coming of the Messiah.

Luke 18:1-8 is the parable of the persistent widow. Just as the author of Psalm 80 is urgently praying, Jesus uses this parable to teach us the importance and the power of our prayers. Luke 18:1 states that Jesus told the parable so that men would "always pray and not lose heart" (or "not faint" or "not give up" as other translations say). The story tells about a wicked judge, who is finally persuaded to bring justice to a persistent widow, who just won't take no for an answer. Her determination and perseverance wears down the judge to eventually act on her behalf. The unjust judge is contrasted by God, the one true Judge, whose justice is holy and perfect.

In verse 7, He says "And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry out to Him day and night?" Our lives are to be marked by never-ceasing prayer. And we should direct our prayers toward the Second Advent, just as the writer of Psalm 80 cries out for the First Advent.

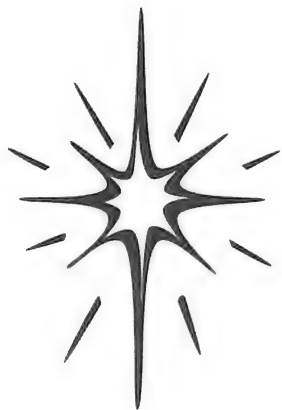
Luke 18:7-8 also provide us wonderful hope and assurance to know that God both hears and answers our prayers. He heard and answered the prayers of the Old Testament believers, and He hears and answers our prayers today. He has provided all of His chosen people redemption and reconciliation through His son, Jesus Christ, and His kingdom will be established forever when Christ returns!



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 18

Tim Craft
Head Coach
Men's Basketball

Psalm 80:1-7
Luke 18:1-8



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 19**

Evan Tidwell-Weinzierl
Adjunct Instructor,
Religious Studies and
Philosophy

Isaiah 66:7-11
Luke 13:31-35

About two years ago, I was leading a youth Bible study for a church I was interning at. I had everything planned out for the evening's study: I was going to introduce several models of leadership with a few biblical examples, and I would wind up introducing the notion of "servant leadership" to the youth, something they may not have heard of yet. We talked about all kinds of things, but I remember one moment when we were talking about the youth serving as leadership in the church and what it looks like to lead from a position of service and for what capacity did they consider themselves prepared concerning such roles. At this point, one of my self-aware youth spoke up and taught us that, while servant leadership sounds great and is undoubtedly important, an even more useful quality sometimes is the ability to discern who to follow and when to follow them, especially when you can't be the leader yourself. "Another way of saying that," she said, "is a savvy follower is just as valuable as an effective leader. Without followers, leaders wouldn't get anything done."

In this passage from Luke, Jesus has no kind things to say about Jerusalem, no kind things to say about Herod, and come to think of it, I don't know that there's a passage from any gospel that has super positive things to say about Herod, but I think that here specifically, Jesus is contrasting this corrupt kingdom of Herod, a prophet-killing kingdom of oppressors that serves only a select few, to the very

different coming kingdom of God, which is led by a one who is actually worth following, whose faithfulness is attested to in our passage from Isaiah, one whose servant leadership will be worthy of our following.

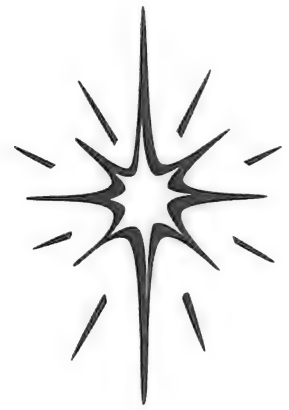
Leadership is important, and qualities that are often associated with leadership can be invaluable in life, but I think we would all do well to remember that, for the majority of us, there will most likely be far more opportunities for following than there will be for leading. And while developing leadership qualities is necessary, if we aren't savvy followers when it counts, we'll have a problem when we have to choose between serving two kingdoms.

Every Advent, we await the fulfillment of our faithful God's promise to deliver us into God's kingdom through a Messiah. This advent, it's my prayer that we have the wisdom to differentiate between what on Earth reflects the kingdom of God and what on Earth doesn't, and that we have the conviction to follow our way to the promised kingdom of God, even if it means that we won't be leading the way there.

The woman stood to read her assigned passage of scripture. It was the Sunday following Christmas, and the small congregation had gathered to sing carols and read once again the story of Incarnation. There was nothing particularly unusual about the service or the people gathered. The service had been repeated many times through the years, and I have every reason to believe that it will be repeated again this year and for many years to come. In the particular cold and dark of a late December morning, the woman stood to read her assigned passage: "... When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." The woman's voice cracked a bit. She stopped to compose herself. She cleared her throat, paused, and began reading again at the beginning: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." Again, her voice weakened and trembled. She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. She was unable to continue reading. The congregation grew uncomfortable. Clearly the reader was distressed. Was she overcome by grief? Did she have some grave sin of which she had become convicted standing before the congregation? Was she aware of some important matter that she needed to confess to the congregation? Silence. When the reader had composed herself she spoke. "I am sorry," she said. "It is just that this story is so beautiful." Suddenly, in that small warm room the text came to life, a text that had been read time and time again. Elizabeth and Mary came to life. No longer were they cardboard

cutouts on the flannel board in the children's department. In that moment, they were real people. With real lives. Difficult and complex lives. Mary had travelled to her kinswoman Elizabeth's home probably because of the scandal of her pregnancy. Elizabeth to this point in her old age had borne the stigma of being unable to have children. The joy of their meeting as expectant mothers overflows into song: first, Elizabeth and then Mary.

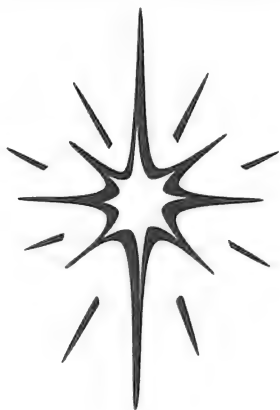
Even though I am not a woman and have only the slightest imagination of what it might mean to carry new life in my body, the beauty of this meeting is not lost on me. For a brief moment, the few of us in that small sanctuary on the first Sunday after Christmas were mystically present with Mary and Elizabeth. We were overcome with the beauty of the mysterious and wonderful activity of God in the world. And we left that room in hopeful expectation of God's presence and activity in the difficulties and complexities of our own lives: God is with us.



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 20

T. Perry Hildreth
Professor of Philosophy
Chair of Faculty

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:39-45



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 21

Teralea Moore
Instructor in Mathematics

Psalms 113
Luke 1:5-25

I recently read that if you live to be seventy years old, you will spend three years of your life just waiting. You may be waiting at a traffic light, waiting in line at the grocery store, waiting for a program to download, waiting for your clothes to dry, or waiting for an elevator.

When my son was young, he loved for me to read to him. One of his favorite books was *Oh, the Places You'll Go*, by Dr. Seuss. In the book, Dr. Seuss describes a place called "the waiting place." It's a useless place where people are just waiting.... waiting for a train to go or a bus to come, or a plane to go or the mail to come, or the rain to go or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow or waiting around for a Yes or No or waiting for their hair to grow. Everyone is just waiting." Like most people, I don't like waiting, but I don't know how to avoid it. Everyone has to spend some time in "the waiting place," but it doesn't have to be a useless place.

In Luke 1:5 – 25, we learn of "an old man" and his wife who are "well along in years," Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have spent much of their lives in "the waiting place." They have been pious, law-abiding saints "walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). Zechariah was one of many Jewish priests whose duties were ordered by casting lots. Some priests lived their entire lives in "the waiting place" never being selected to perform priestly functions within the tabernacle. However, on this day, the waiting ended for Zechariah. While on duty at the temple, in addition to burning incense on the altar in the sanctuary, he had a responsibility to pray for the salvation of Israel. He may have also prayed, as he

surely must have many times before, that God would send him a son. Elizabeth and Zechariah had no children because Elizabeth was barren – a situation that in their day was a disgrace.

As the people were praying outside the temple, Zechariah entered the sanctuary of God to burn incense. The angel, Gabriel, appeared to him and told him that his waiting for a son had ended. His prayers had been heard and answered. He and Elizabeth would have a son, and they should name him John. Because of Zechariah's disbelief that he and Elizabeth could have a son at their age, Gabriel told him he would be unable to speak until his son was born....more waiting.

The congregation, outside the temple, grew weary. People waited and waited for Zechariah. "When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak" (Luke 1:22).

God had a new beginning with Zechariah and Elizabeth. After a lifetime of waiting they would have a son. As we all spend time in "the waiting place," will we, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, remain faithful and useful as we wait?

Advent is a time of expectant waiting and preparation. We are looking forward to the celebration of Jesus' birth and to the day He comes again. What should we do as we wait? We can worship and praise Him, love and serve Him, and share His love with others. When we do these things, we will find joy in "the waiting place."

When young Mary, who carried Jesus in her womb, visited old Elizabeth, who nurtured John in hers, Mary sang about the wonder of God's grace and the astonishment of God's favor:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit
rejoices in God my Savior.

Her song rose from an imagination stocked with the bright visions and hopeful dreams of Israel's prophets, visions and dreams like Micah's, of a day when swords would be beaten into plowshares and the nations would learn war no more. Like the poets and singers who came before her, she yearned for shalom.

Mary praised God whose love will not let us be lost in the lonely heights of false pride or in the desperate depths of poverty:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts
of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from
their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has
filled the hungry with good things, and sent
the rich away empty.

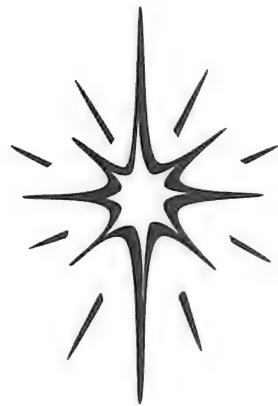
There is great wisdom in Mary's song. Don't miss that she sang: "My soul magnifies the Lord." To magnify is, of course, to enlarge, to make bigger and greater, and to bring in to clearer focus. We have some choices to make, real and powerful choices, about where we place our focus—about what we magnify.

We don't have many choices at all about the world's problems or our perplexities. They're already a part of our experience. We can't rewrite our history and leave out the things which cause us guilt and regret. We do have choices, though, crucial choices, about where we direct our attention. This is the discipline of delight: not to privilege the world's problems but God's saving power instead. Not to focus on our perplexities but on God's sure presence? Not to make more of our guilt and regret than we make of God's good grace and tender mercy. We choose what to magnify, and that choice makes all the difference. To magnify God is to open the gift of joy.

You might remember that Henri Nouwen said:

[I]t is amazing to experience ... the radical difference between cynicism and joy. Every moment of each day I have the chance to choose between cynicism and joy. Every thought I have can be cynical or joyful. Every word I speak can be cynical or joyful. Every action can be cynical or joyful. Increasingly I am aware of all these possible choices, and increasingly I discover that every choice for joy in turn reveals more joy and offers more reason to make life a true celebration. (Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, pp. 117-118)

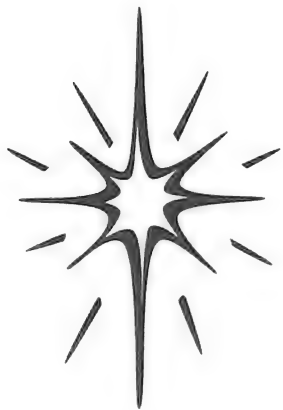
There is no lasting and loving energy in negativity; there's no healing and transforming power in cynicism. Joylessness is empty and leaves us empty. But the joy of Jesus, which we celebrate especially his season, changes everything.



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 22**

**Guy Sayles
Adjunct Professor
School of Divinity**

**Micah 4:1-5
Luke 1:46b-55**



**WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 23**

Biju Chacko
Chaplain and ACPE
Supervisor
Department of Pastoral
Services at Duke
University Hospital

Micah 4:6-8
Mark 2:1-12

Waiting is one of the most difficult experiences in life. Whether it is waiting for someone to respond to an email or waiting for news, good or bad, we become impatient. At times, I find myself exploring ways to end the waiting, even when I have limited control over the situation. When the waiting period is over, we feel much relief.

Advent season is upon us. It is traditionally a period of waiting for the birth of the Christ child. We sing hymns, read scriptures, decorate our homes and sanctuaries with Advent colors and materials. There is a sense of expectation and promise in the air. Sermons and devotionals fill pulpits proclaiming the humble birth of Jesus. We wait to hear again the promise and fulfillment of a Savior. It is a season of hope and anticipation. I have wondered if Advent is limited to one particular season. How significant is Advent beyond the traditional four-week celebration? Does waiting for God never end?

The Prophet Micah lived in a time where God's people were waiting for deliverance. He rebuked community leaders and priests for their practice of injustice and oppression. God's own people, the Israelites, are in exile. They lost their land and their identity. They believed that God would come through to deliver them. That had not happened yet and people were getting tired of waiting. Nation after nation attacked God's people and took away any hope of restoration. The waiting continued. Micah also had some words of encouragement for God's people. He encouraged them in their waiting by reminding them of God's promise of restoration. When the people could not see any hope of restoration, Micah conveyed God's plan of restoration.

Those waiting for God's intervention would see impossible things. According to Micah, God was going to gather the lame, the exiled, and the grief-stricken. These individuals had nothing to hope for even while waiting. Yet, God was going to give them a new identity, as God's remnant and as a strong nation. The experience of waiting takes on a new dimension when God steps in. All the pain and suffering will transform into a new identity for God's people. God's initiative to gather the people will make this possible.

All of us are waiting for God to act on our behalf. We have at least one area of our lives that can use God's intervention. While we believe that God is able to act, waiting for God's intervention can bring much impatience and exhaustion. In our very experiences, Micah reminds us that the Lord will act. God's intervention transforms our waiting and reminds us of our identity, as God's remnant. I pray that this Advent Season will be one where God's presence is always with us, even when the waiting prolongs.

Regardless of their origins, many of our Christmas traditions and decorations have been used by Christians throughout history to tell the story of Jesus. The shape of the poinsettia flower and leaves are often thought to symbolize the Star which led the Wise Men to Jesus. The holly reminds us that this Child born in the manger came to die on a cross in order to reconcile us to God. Its prickly leaves represent the crown of thorns Jesus wore and its red berries symbolize Jesus' blood that was shed for us. The Pine and Fir are evergreen – reminding us of the eternal life that is ours because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. The Ivy has to cling to something for support as it grows, causing us to remember our need to cling to Christ, because apart from Him we can do nothing.

One by one, every week leading up to Christmas, candles of the advent wreath are lit reminding us of the hope, joy, peace, and love that is ours because of the coming of Christ. And the white candle, called the Christ candle, brings to mind that Jesus is the Light of the World who dispels the darkness in our lives.

Light overcoming darkness, oppression being broken, and peace in the midst of troubling times are all themes Isaiah has in common with Luke's narrative of the birth of Christ. The way in which God ultimately accomplishes his purpose is not only through the miracle of the incarnation but through the scandal of the crucifixion.

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey shares this story of Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci who went

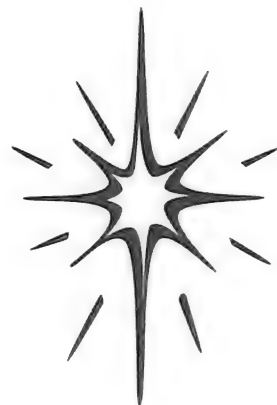
to China in the sixteenth century and brought along samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it.

The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child, but when he produced paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, the audience reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshiping her rather than the crucified God.

As I thumb once more through my stack of Christmas cards, I realize that we in Christian countries do much the same thing. We observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we purge from it any reminder of how the story that began in Bethlehem turned out at Calvary (p. 33).

On this Christmas Eve as we reflect on the "child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger," let us not forget how the story that began in Bethlehem turned out at Calvary. "To you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior*, [emphasis added] who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:11-12).

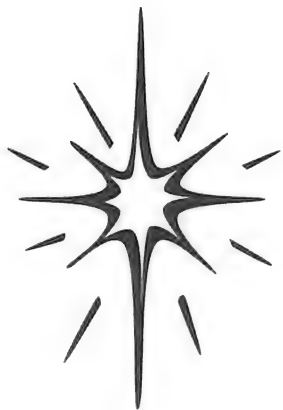
Prayer: Lord, in love and adoration we remember the manger, the cross and the empty tomb.



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 24

Tracy Jessup
VP for Christian Life and
Service and Senior
Minister to the University

Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-14



**FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 25**

**Frank Bonner
President of the
University**

**Isaiah 62:6-12
John 1:1-14**

There are many parts, many aspects of Christmas. It is a time of family gathering, exchanging of presents, social occasions of all kinds, travel perhaps, and of course the commercialization of the holiday. There is so much that we Christians must strive continuously to ensure that we do not lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas in the midst of it all.

Perhaps most important, Christmas should be a time of reflection, a time to reflect upon ultimate meaning. Of course we understand that this is the time to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I suggest that we take our reflection even further and remember that it is the Christmas message which conveys the whole meaning of life, the whole reason for our existence.

We find this meaning in John 1:12-13: "But to all who receive him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." To become children of God—that is the reason we were created, the meaning and the purpose of our lives. No where else do we find our ultimate purpose or the meaning of life.

Each fall, at the beginning of the semester, I address the student body of Gardner-Webb University. This fall I suggested that they search the great philosophers and writers for the ultimate meaning of life. But I added that while they would find a great deal of meaning about life, they would come up empty searching those

sources for the ultimate meaning of life. Here is how I put it to them: "You see, there is one purpose for your life, one meaning, one reason for which you were created. There is a lot of meaning and purpose packed around the real meaning of life—but at the heart of it all, there is only one purpose, one meaning, one reason you were created—and that is to become a child of God and to live with Him in fellowship now and—hopefully—forever. That is why God created you—because He wants you in fellowship with Him."

The power to become a child of God. That is the message of Christmas and should be the subject of our reflections at this beautiful occasion.

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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be a standard notebook page.

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Gardner-Webb University At-a-Glance

- Gardner-Webb is a private university with a Baptist heritage, located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.
- We serve nearly 5,000 students from over 37 states and 21 countries.
- The U.S. News and World Report also ranked Gardner-Webb as one of the "Best Universities" in the South that offer "a full range of undergraduate and master's programs" in the 2014 edition of "America's Best Colleges."
- Gardner-Webb was one of just 500 universities and colleges nationwide to be named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (for the sixth consecutive year).
- Gardner-Webb was recently awarded the North American Mission Board's (NAMB) Courts Redford Award, which recognizes the nation's top 10 universities for mobilizing student missionaries through NAMB.
- A total of five professional schools, two academic schools, and 11 academic departments offer over 80 undergraduate and graduate major fields of study.
- Our 160+ full-time faculty (13:1 student-to-faculty ratio) are teacher-scholars who help foster meaningful dialogue, critical analysis, and spiritual challenge within a diverse community of learning.
- Gardner-Webb University is a NCAA Division I institution and competes in the Big South Conference and the Coastal Collegiate Swimming Association.
- Gardner-Webb features active chapters of at least 10 national honor societies in such academic disciplines as Biology, Spanish, English, French, Psychology, Religious Studies and Theology, and Nursing.



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Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University's purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).



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